

## **The Dilemma of Two Syrias**

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It is no secret that the larger part of Syrian minorities are now either clearly on the side of the regime or trying to stay on the neutral side, but never on the side of the opposition.

The reason for this rather strange phenomenon comes very clearly as the conflict is getting increasingly radicalized Islamically; with so many rebel groups fighting against the regime carrying the AlQaida black flag, imposing strict Islamic Sharia rules, and beheading and cutting people's hands for theft on so many occasions. This has driven the liberal and more secular minorities of Syria to choose the side of the regime, which in return, always played the secular card, in addition to the card of the protector of minorities, as it pretends to be mainly dependant on minorities, while secretly forming an alliance with major Sunni merchants in an attempt to hold the stick from the middle.

On many occasions during this conflict, minority communities have stood side by side with the regime forces, especially when the rebels get closer to their areas. One example is the case of the Christian town of Sайдnaya. As rebel forces along with figures from the opposition failed miserably at reassuring these minorities that they were not a target, the more they took the side of the regime. In fact actions speak louder than words, and the actions of the rebels were very loud. In reality, any individual belonging to a minority is in real danger of his/her life when captured by any one of the rebel groups. Of course Sunnis who are accused of siding with the regime are often subjected to the same horrible fate as individuals from minorities.

There is no denying that the actions of the regime exemplified by the use of extremely violent measures in facing the uprising, lack of proper economic development, and support for radical groups in Iraq by directly providing them with men and finance, compose the main factors of the radicalization of so many of Syrian communities as a result of so many years of severe oppression.

However, this gap between the Sunni majority and minorities is not a new issue. It began to widen by the late 1970s with the rise of radical Islam, which came as a reaction to the Iranian revolution that had taken a clear Shia approach and had insisted on forming the image of Iran as a Shia country. Iran posed a clear threat to its neighbouring Arab Sunni countries, especially in light of the fact that Shia Muslims form a considerable part of the populations of these countries.

With the early 1980s, it was obvious that the Syrian regime was depending on sectarianism in a way not seen before. It relied on Alawites in general, and a number of other minorities such as Ismailies were gradually occupying high positions in the army and security forces. A fact that, combined with the armed rebellion initiated by the Muslim Brotherhood, only helped in widening the gap.

The targeting of minorities by the Muslim brotherhood surely was in favour of the regime, making it look like the defender of those minorities, and establishing a deep feeling that minorities cannot survive without a minority based regime.

The gap was to get a new dimension after the Death of Hafez al-Asad and the ascension of his son Bashar to power. The new economic 'reforms' that were introduced were also responsible for creating

yet another gap; a class gap. As a result, the middle class, which was the largest social class, started to suffer due to severe inflation and the inability of the government to create more jobs.

The Syrian scene shortly before the crisis can be described as the rich and upper middle class gaining more and more from the new economic system, the appearance of huge shopping malls all over major cities, while at the same time, living conditions kept deteriorating in rural areas and the majority of people started to suffer. As a consequence, the sectarian gap was getting worse, especially with the interference of the economic factor which fuelled the grudge against the minorities, especially Alawites who were thought to be, unjustifiably, favoured and privileged by the regime.

With the start of the crisis, the image was rather clear that most of the areas opposing the regime were mainly inhabited by the Sunni lower class majority. At that early point, it was obvious that the major part of minority groups was not interested in taking part in the revolution, joining them were large parts of the Sunni upper middle class living in the two major cities of Damascus and Aleppo.

Alawites saw the uprising as a reliving of the painful era of the Muslim brotherhood in the 1980s and were feeling rather anxious about the fact that most demonstrations were coming out from conservative Sunni neighbourhoods, which were also considered by the Sunni upper middle class to be less educated and untrustworthy. This position coupled with the fear factor generated by the cruel reaction of the regime to demonstrations, played a big part in preventing the two major cities from being a part of the uprising until much later.

What is most concerning is the notion that Syria now is divided in two separate entities; government controlled on the one hand, and anarchy dominated on the other. Each of those parts seem to have opposite characteristics. Government controlled areas are mainly inhabited by middle and upper middle class and enjoy much better living conditions, public services and are rather safer to live in. Whereas, areas that are considered to be opposition strongholds suffer the most, being damaged severely while vast numbers of their inhabitants have been displaced, sometimes permanently.

With the passing of time, this division of the country is becoming increasingly apparent, and a feeling of different identity is starting to form. The gap which started by the late 1970s is starting to take shape into a deep feeling of grudge and injustice on the side of the opposition and the areas affiliated with it, and a feeling of contempt and suspicion on the side of the areas affiliated with the regime.

This schizophrenia can be seen in the most obvious manner in Damascus where people in the city centre live a rather normal life, while neighbourhoods on the outskirts have been heavily bombarded, their inhabitants killed, starved, and severely displaced. The grudge is translated into the missiles and mortars that are launched by the rebels indiscriminately towards civilian neighbourhoods in the centre, and the case of the recent mortar bomb hitting a school and killing 14 children is a clear example.

It is not the killing, kidnapping, starving, not the diaspora of millions that is the most worrying, but rather the danger of the consequences of all that on the future of coexistence between the so many Syrian communities. The feeling now is that Syrians belong to two different Syrias; so different that there is a possibility that this difference may very well affect the future map of the country.